

Peretz's Worlds: Separating the Man from the Myth

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Unlike some other major Yiddish writers, I.L. Peretz has been poorly served by posterity. Sholem Aleichem feels familiar, if only from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Bashevis Singer's fascination with human frailty chimes with our modern sensibility. By contrast, Peretz, whose personal charisma fascinated his contemporaries, remains an enigma.

On one level, this is surprising. After all, Peretz was radiantly, magnificently human. His quicksilver personality had the depths and sparkle of a faceted opal: passionate, restless, questioning, iconoclastic, and endlessly playful. His jokes could be warm or cutting, depending on his mood, but he was generous, and he loved company. And his life story embodies the emergence of modern Yiddish literature and the formation of modern Jewish culture.

Peretz was born in the Polish town of Zamosc, almost certainly in 1852. Today the pastel-colored merchant houses in its old market square and its resplendent clock tower have earned the town UNESCO-protected status. In Peretz's day, it was known as "little Paris"—an old, mainly Jewish town snug inside massive brick ramparts. His memoirs recall a place of "sages and scribes," so quiet that "hardly anyone died, hardly anyone was born," where Russian soldiers from the nearby garrison spent their nights carousing in the Jewish taverns. Nonetheless, the town's characters yielded material for many of his later stories.

Peretz had prominent business and rabbinical forebears, but his own father struggled to make money as a timber merchant and was often away from home. Chafing at the restrictions of his traditional religious education, the young Peretz ran wild for much of his childhood. “I played general with a whole troop of kheyder boys under my command,” he wrote. His rebellious nature—“I was considered a lost cause”—eventually led the young tearaway to a local private library, “the only house with a lit stairwell in the whole town.” Here Peretz discovered a world of secular books—foreign literature, popular science, and history.

As a young man, Peretz worked in a brewery and as a bookkeeper and gave private Hebrew lessons. He also developed the habit of writing verse, some of it comic and satiric, in several languages. By his late twenties he was divorced, remarried, and had qualified as a lawyer. Now settled in Zamosc with his second wife and a son from his first marriage, he set up a thriving legal practice and continued to experiment with poems and stories in Yiddish, Hebrew, and for a time Polish, almost all unpublished.

This comfortable bourgeois existence was turned upside down in 1888. That year, the czarist authorities took away Peretz’s law license after he was denounced as a radical. At the same time, he turned away from Hebrew and toward Yiddish in his writing and published “Monish,” the darkly transgressive ballad about a yeshiva student that made Peretz’s reputation.

In 1891, by now in close contact with many leading Hebrew and Yiddish writers, Peretz and his family moved to Warsaw. For the next twenty-five years he worked for the city’s Jewish Community Council, putting in six-hour days overseeing the cemetery department. His income was far below what he had earned as a lawyer, but at least the job left plenty of time free for writing.

The family took a small apartment at Number 1 Ceglana Street (since renamed Peretz Street), a red brick dwelling house on a mixed Jewish-Christian street whose stillness was regularly pierced by the whistle of nearby factories. There was a tiny bedroom for Peretz and his wife; another bedroom for his son, Lucian; Peretz’s study; and a kitchen.

This modest family home soon became the unofficial center of Poland’s new wave of Jewish writers. An entire literary generation made the life-changing pilgrimage to Peretz’s door, summoning up the courage to pull the doorbell by a sign that read: “I. L. Peretz receives visitors between 3 and 4 on Saturdays.”

Sholem Asch made the journey as a shy nineteen-year-old. Y. Y. Trunk, terrified at the prospect, had to be dragged there by his uncle. Lamed Shapiro was so flustered that, as he later wrote, he dressed up “like Genghis Khan, in a parody of Russian attire.” All became regular visitors, as did Weissenberg, Kacyzne, Nomberg, Pinski, Hirshbeyn, Opatoshu, Der Nister, and a host of other major writers.

Peretz, Nomberg wrote in an affectionate memoir, was “free as a bird” in the world of ideas and had no interest in founding a literary school; rather he acted as a *foter fun a*

literarisher mishpokhe—a father of a literary family—and a *literarisher rebbe*—a teacher to his young disciples.

Peretz served as a model for how to be a writer. “When Peretz writes, he comes alive.... It’s as if he’s dancing and singing, he’s happy, he looks younger,” observed Mordkhe Spektor, a novelist and close friend. Spektor also noted Peretz’s businesslike approach to his trade: “Whenever a publisher approached him for ‘merchandise,’ he always had something ready—a Hasidic tale, a sketch, a short story. And if the publisher was poor and could only afford to pay for a few lines, Peretz would offer him a short poem.”

More than that, Peretz offered a blueprint for how to live a bohemian intellectual life. Everything about his home seemed individual, distinctive: the large plants filling his study, the Oriental rug covering his desk, the constant presence of novelist Yankev Dinezon (a distinguished writer in his own right), rolling Peretz’s cigarettes or attending to his literary affairs, and the man himself—helping the maid press clothes, humming folk songs, or startling neighbors by appearing bare-chested.

Peretz’s arrival in Warsaw coincided with the city’s emergence as a teeming Jewish metropolis and a center of *yidishkayt*. The family’s small apartment was at the heart of this rich Jewish world. Just around the corner, a maze of courtyard synagogues and prayer houses occupied the block between Twarda and Grzybowska streets; two blocks away was Krochmalna, a warren of brothels and small traders later immortalized by Bashevis Singer. Nearby Grzybow Square, today the home of Warsaw’s Yiddish theater, was the site for large, angry demonstrations in the protest-filled years around 1905. And on Nalewki Street, just around the corner from Peretz’s flat, a vibrant Yiddish publishing industry sprang up in the 1900s.

Warsaw was the crucible for Peretz’s intellectual transformations. He arrived in the city a committed follower of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment. The 1890s saw him drawn to socialism and Jewish radicalism. And his final intellectual flowering, from the 1900s onward, was as a cautious modernist with renewed respect for traditional Jewish values, a secularist who increasingly drew on Hasidism and the orthodox way of life for his literary subjects.

Peretz was so attached to Warsaw, so much at home in the city, that for many years he rarely left. All that changed in 1902 after he spent a few weeks recuperating in the spa town of Marienbad following a heart attack. Gradually he began to tour farther afield. Invitations for readings and lectures poured in from cities across Poland and the Russian Empire—Kiev, Minsk, Lemberg (today, L’viv), Kraków, Odessa, Saint Petersburg. In the Jewish world, Peretz was now a magnetic public intellectual and an A-list celebrity.

His tours were often billed as Perets teg (Peretz Days) and were greeted with the sort of fervor that today we associate with rock stars. Critic Alexander Mukdoni marveled at the “mass hysteria” that seized the audience as Peretz finished speaking in Warsaw’s Philharmonic Hall. A similar thing happened when Peretz visited Minsk in 1907: in Avrom Reyzen’s words, “the entire town went topsy-turvy” as college students, workers,

and the radical intelligentsia all jostled for a glimpse of the great man. Ansky witnessed the Peretz effect in a sold-out hall in Saint Petersburg; the crowds spilling out into the streets contained hundreds who simply “came to see Peretz rather than hear him; many of them could barely understand Yiddish,” he wrote.

By the time of his death in 1915, Peretz had attained a unique stature in Polish Jewry. At his funeral, a vast crowd, estimated at 100,000, accompanied his coffin to Warsaw’s Jewish cemetery.

Defining Peretz’s contribution, the nature of his genius, is difficult precisely because it was so all-encompassing. Yes, his personality and his writing made him a magnet for a generation of precociously talented young writers. They flocked to Peretz’s apartment from all corners of the Russian Empire and created modern Yiddish literature under his guidance.

But his influence spread well beyond literature. He inspired an explosion of Jewish creative energy, with artists, folk singers, actors, musicians, and playwrights all drawn to Peretz’s Warsaw. We might think of Peretz as the catalyst for a Warsaw Renaissance, a movement of national revival similar to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Or—to sum up the emotional mood of those times in a more modern idiom—we might think of him as the presiding spirit of Yiddish Pride.